

Service Learning in a Basic Writing Class: A Best Case Scenario

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the particular challenges and possibilities of service learning pedagogy for basic writers. Because a number of scholars of service learning and basic writing (Adler-Kassner, Arca, and Kraemer) are concerned primarily with developing underprepared students' academic literacies, I investigated how the students in a service learning basic writing class situated their service experience—represented that “text” rhetorically—in their major academic research essay for the course. The article draws on one student's experience of making connections among the “rich mix” of course texts, including personal experience, as a best case. From this example, I argue for strategies of service learning pedagogy that could better help basic writers achieve their goals for academic writing.

KEYWORDS: service learning; personal narrative; academic literacies; ethnography

With time, the struggle for social justice will be met with more people trying to make sure that it becomes more fair to urban schools, and I am willing to be part of that, what say you?

—William, English 100S student

Whatever the impact of community service learning on the students themselves, I, as basic skills teacher, must necessarily consider its effects on their writing.

—Rosemary L. Arca (139-40)

Service learning pedagogy presents particular challenges and possibilities for basic writing courses. Responding to Bruce Herzberg's article, "Community Service and Critical Teaching," Linda Adler-Kassner points out that Herzberg's experiences using service learning pedagogy with business students at Bentley College—students who, as Adler-Kassner describes, "believed that they earned their place in the meritocracy that Mike Rose discusses in *Lives on the Boundary*" (553)—contrast markedly with the experiences of her own students at General College, the University of Minnesota's open admission unit. Adler-Kassner describes working with students who "were

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the underserved, underprepared excluded students around whom Rose's critiques of the American educational system were based" (553). While the primary focus of Herzberg's service learning courses was for his students to achieve critical and cultural consciousness and learn to see social problems as systemic, the goal for Adler-Kassner's students—who she claims already brought to the course a critical consciousness from having been "given the shaft" by the system—was to "articulate whatever consciousness they had in a way that was acceptable to the academy" (555). Adler-Kassner argues that service learning composition courses for underprepared students should provide students opportunities for critical and cultural analysis, but they should do so while practicing academic discourse, especially as they include "explor[ing] the role of writing in different contexts" (555).

More recently, other scholars of basic writing echo Adler-Kassner's concerns for service learning pedagogy focusing on issues of authority. Sharing Adler-Kassner's emphasis on teaching underprepared students the skills of academic writing through service learning, Rosemary Arca asks, "Isn't true 'authority'—that sense of potency as a writer who not only has something important to say but also has the skills to say it well—what we want our basic writers to realize?" (141). Don J. Kraemer, critical of some forms of service learning in composition, argues further that certain writing-for-the-community service learning projects work to diminish basic writers' sense of authority "because rather than inquire into the complexity of making leadership collaborative, they advance the process of making student servitude seem inevitable" (93). The "product-based, performance-centered moment mandated" by writing-for projects contradicts the "process-oriented, learning-centered pedagogy commonly associated with basic writing" (92).

According to Adler-Kassner, Arca, and Kraemer, one key challenge for using service learning pedagogy in basic writing courses is to facilitate students' critical and cultural critique of social issues while practicing the conventions of academic discourse. In a service learning course themed literacy and education—like Herzberg's—basic writing students may critically reflect on ways in which the community they are serving, as well as perhaps they themselves, have been shafted by the U.S. educational system. At the same time they must learn to write themselves into this system, crafting such critiques in a form appropriate for the academy.

To what extent does service learning pedagogy better enable such a tall order for basic writers, or does it further complicate students' acquisition of academic literacies? Various scholars have documented and critiqued the ways in which process pedagogy (Delpit), tracking (Rose), and dominant

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cultural classroom expectations (Heath), among other practices of the U.S. education system, extend the challenge of underprepared students to write in the approved and standard discourses of the academy. Add to this the point by David Bartholomae that even in his or her first year of college a student must try on—establish authority within—a number of particular academic discourses before acquiring the disciplinary knowledge that would make the practice more than a set of mere rules. Proficiency follows upon student confidence and community-discourse membership. Therefore, is service learning pedagogy appropriate for all basic writers, some of whom against the odds have struggled through unjust systems and navigated them somewhat successfully to pursue their dream of a college education? How and why should they be taught to critique that dream while trying to live it?

Intrigued by the possibilities of service learning, yet troubled by its increasing adoption in composition courses despite the lack of qualitative research on this pedagogy, I conducted an ethnography of a service learning basic writing class to situate and contextualize the social justice claims made about the theory and practice of service learning pedagogy and to note its effects on student writing. In the service learning basic writing class I studied, students combined intensive reading and writing about literacy, language, community, and culture with service in a particular community setting. One out of their four weekly class meetings, every Thursday for an hour and twenty minutes, students and their instructor at State University convened at Elm Elementary, a school located in the low-income university district, to tutor first graders in reading and writing. Course writing assignments asked students to analyze literacy in multiple contexts of primary and secondary sources, including past personal experience, hands-on experience at the elementary school, as well as public and academic texts. I attended all class meetings on campus and at Elm as a participant-observer.

William, the student discussed in this article, is a “best case.” He represents a possibility, a goal to work toward in service learning basic writing classes. As a student who self-selected this course because he was already an after-school mentor at Elm, William pushed the boundaries of his formula for “good” writing by situating his service “text” among other personal and academic sources in his academic essay. I argue that key to William’s success for the academic research essay for this class was his engagement with what Arca calls a “rich mix of sources,” which included, in addition to secondary sources, first-hand observations from his community service experience. Challenged to integrate new experience and information from multiple perspectives, William relearned prior notions of “good writing,”

as he had understood it to be taught to him in high school. Similar to the course Adler-Kassner describes, this service learning basic writing class focused on attaining academic literacy. Yet, while Adler-Kassner, Arca, and Kraemer discuss a student population that is underprepared, the students placed into this particular basic writing course were, in a sense, overprepared, according to placement lore in the basic writing program at State University. Specifically, students who place into English 100S are underprepared for college-level writing at State University because they are overprepared in a particular form of writing—the five-paragraph theme—which may have served them well in high school and on standardized tests, but will not do for college. Unlike Adler-Kassner’s, Arca’s, and Kraemer’s students who arrive in class with a diminished sense of authority as writers, these basic writers have met state standards and are good at writing in accordance with those standards. Therefore, the instructor of this course is in the difficult position of acknowledging students’ authority as writers while simultaneously disrupting that sense in order to authorize students to write in other ways. As the course instructor, Mary (the names of all participants in the study have been changed), explained to me in her second interview, these particular basic writers “need to be shaken up somehow.” She saw her basic writing course as disrupting students’ formulaic ways of writing, reading, and thinking. The community service portion of the class was designed as one way to help students realize, among other things, that the college classroom isn’t the only place where learning occurs and that literacy criteria shift depending upon context.

A Service Learning Partnership with Elm Elementary

The theme for English 100S was “literacy,” but students were encouraged to explore additional issues about the broader topic of education. While Mary created the assignments and chose the readings for this class, and also borrowed from her colleagues, she did not exclusively choose the theme or design the course. The goals and curriculum for service learning stem from the basic writing program.¹ Like other 100S sections, the assignment sequence moved from personal to academic to public discourse. Students drafted and revised a literacy autobiography essay, an academic research paper about topics related to literacy or education, and collaboratively they wrote a children’s book in addition to a reflective essay on their process and rhetorical choices in creating this book. Students concluded

the course with a take-home exam reflecting on their writing process across all assignments.

This particular service learning class represents, from Thomas Deans' taxonomy, both writing-*for* and writing-*about* the community. According to Deans, in the writing-*for* model, students compose documents for community organizations; the very act of composing these documents is the community service. In the writing-*about* model, students perform some kind of community service—in this class, tutoring—and then write about this experience, often in community-based research projects. The community service provides another text for course content—a hands-on experience in exploration of the course theme. In this class, students created books *for* the needs of the Elm community and wrote *about* the context of their service to this community (tutoring) in assignments focused on literacy and education. According to Deans, “[T]he writing-*about*-the-community and writing-*for*-the-community strands of such courses, while complementary, value distinctly different literacies, engage distinctly different learning processes, require distinctly different rhetorical practices, and result in distinctly different kinds of texts” (19; emphasis in original). Thus, the formal writing assignments in this course, in combination with the community service of tutoring first graders, were designed to meet the English100S curricular goals of examining how literacy and “good” writing change in different contexts.

Personal and Academic Writing

In addition to thinking about literacy and education through a variety of means, including tutoring, books, articles, video, and their own essay writing, students wrote journal responses on their readings, their visits to Elm, and other topics. Mary provided the reading journal prompts, while she helped the class generate their own prompts for the weekly “Elm Observation Journals.” Students predominately reflected on their community service experience—tutoring—as a practicum. They related personally to their first grade partners, pointing out tutoring problems while brainstorming strategies. According to Chris Anson, such journal writing should not merely document or log service experiences, but also provide a means for the “critical examination of ideas, or the sort of consciousness-raising reflection, that is the mark of highly successful learning” (169).

Throughout the semester, the students in this class were prompted by the instructor to make connections among multiple course texts, pre-

dominately through class discussion, personal narrative assignments, and informal writing. The journals were also a means for students to reflect on their personal experiences with literacy and education. Having them write a journal entry about a memorable grade-school experience, for example, might lead students to compare their experiences with those of their Elm first grade literacy partners. The journal was thereby an ongoing prompt for students to enrich their perspectives by way of personal experience, past or present.

However, as Adler-Kassner, Arca, and Kraemer are concerned with basic writers' academic writing, I was interested to see how the students situated their service experience—represented that text rhetorically—in their major research essay for the course, the investigation essay. The investigation essay was the second formal writing assignment, preceded by the literacy autobiography. I chose to focus on the investigation essay because it seemed most explicitly to ask students to demonstrate the kinds of skills demanded in the academy. The assignment required students to conduct research, using secondary and primary sources, and sustain an argument about an issue related to the course theme. Certainly there can be a number of assignments in service learning courses, whether writing-for or writing-about, that help students practice academic discourse. While most of the students did discuss their experiences at Elm with other course “texts” in their final exam, I wanted to see how students would situate their personal service/tutoring experiences in the context of making an academic argument about a larger social issue.

In “Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal,” Candace Spigelman describes the multiple configurations of “the personal” in writing instruction. She explains that many writing instructors have interpreted the writing of expressivist pedagogy as “writing-as-self-expression” or “writing-for-self-discovery” (70). To counter “semester-long composition programs that call for writing as personal confession, the cathartic soul-searching narrative of trauma or enlightenment associated with expressivism taken to the extreme,” hard-core advocates of academic discourse banished all forms of personal writing (70). Still Spigelman asserts that “narratives of personal experience can operate at a sophisticated level of argument” (71). Narrative can have its own logic. Arguing for the use of personal narrative in academic writing, Spigelman claims that “the telling of stories can actually serve the same purposes as academic writing and that narratives of personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly work” (64). Drawing on Aristotle’s discussions of narration and example, she explores “the efficacy of narrative

argument in academic writing” (64), and makes claims about “the personal as scholarly evidence” (75). Certainly, qualitative research methodologies such as ethnography demonstrate how personal stories can provide examples from which theories may be generalized. Thus, I wanted to examine how students used their personal tutoring experiences at Elm “not [as] a confessional essay of personal angst or therapeutic rehabilitation, but an analytic argument, in which personal experience is used evidentially to illustrate and prove a particular position” (77).

In the investigation essay, it was not a requirement to use Elm as a source, and only one student, William, actually did so, trying to contextualize his service/tutoring experience in that academic essay. The other students might not have used Elm as a source because they chose topics that were to varying degrees less directly related to issues at Elm. Although Arca describes reading “a wide range of interesting and locally focused topics” in her students’ papers (140), I found that few students chose “locally focused topics” that related to their service experience in this class. Yet, William, perhaps fueled by critically reflecting on his service/tutoring experience and developing tutoring strategies accordingly, voluntarily made the connections among the “rich mix” of course texts—and other sources—in his academic essay.

William’s (Personal) Academic Connections

An eighteen-year-old first-year student, William identifies as “mixed” racially and checked off both the “African-American or Black” and “Asian American or Pacific Islander” categories on a background survey I had distributed. Although he is from the east side of the city in which State University is located, he lives in the dorms. He is a pre-business major who hopes to specialize in marketing (students at State University have to apply to the business school to become majors), and in his second interview he discussed his aspirations of attending graduate school, “possibly for a Ph.D. in business.” He was also one of the few students who indicated on the background survey that he works part-time; he works twenty hours a week as an office assistant at his dorm and was on an academic scholarship for the 2004-2005 academic year. William has very short dark hair and dark eyes, which peer through glasses that look almost invisible (small rectangular unframed lenses rest on thin silver “arms” that attach to his ears). He generally wears baggy pants and over-sized T-shirts and hoodies to class and to Elm, and his outfits usually appear well coordinated, even with his tennis

shoes (of which he had several pairs). For example, to his second interview, which was before class, he wore dark, crisp-new jeans with a bright white T-shirt and a matching hooded sweatshirt with gleaming white unscuffed tennis shoes, tongues up with no laces.

As I will soon make clear, William perhaps most exemplified, as Mary described, the need to be “shaken up” in the way he approached writing, but as a student he enjoyed shaking up the class. Oftentimes, he provided comic relief by joking with the instructor, other students, and me. Perhaps because of his jokes, at the beginning of the term Mary expressed concern about how William would do in the course. In her first interview, Mary explained that while William is “sharp and witty,” he is not as “in touch with the analytical” side of his own or his literacy partner’s experiences, although she admitted this may not have been much different from other students in the class.

Like many of the other students placed in this class, William adhered to a specific formula for describing his own and his partner’s experiences in writing. His writing process consistently included creating a handwritten outline before drafting each formal essay, which would often be organized by five Roman numerals. Other “good writing” formulas that he had articulated to his classmates in discussion included drawing on a formal outline, organizing essays into five-paragraph themes and including a “closing sentence” at the end of each body paragraph.

William’s signature formula for “good writing,” however, was beginning all of his writing assignments for the course—both informal journals and formal essays—by listing two or three questions. For example, all three drafts of William’s literacy autobiography, the first formal writing assignment of the course, began with the same two questions: “What literacy experience have you learned the most from? What did it mean to you and how did it affect your literacy ability?” As he explained at the end of the term to his small group, which was working on the collaborative book-writing project, beginning with questions (from an assignment prompt or of his own creation) is “my thing.” When another member of his collaborative writing group challenged him on this rhetorical choice, he was hesitant to compromise and had a difficult time brainstorming other ways to begin the essay. So far in his educational career, beginning any kind of writing with questions had been effective; therefore, he had internalized that this is a strategy for good writing—it is the right way to write.

The remainder of the introductory paragraph to the final draft of William’s literacy autobiography essay highlights one of the main challenges

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he faced with writing: making connections across ideas—from these opening questions—which means, of course, moving beyond the five-paragraph theme:

The most significant literacy experience I've had was being *Hooked on Phonics* from the first to the third grade. This was an in school program that really helped make reading, writing, and speaking properly interesting. It promoted learning in multi-leveled steps that built on my existing skills. Being *Hooked on Phonics* wasn't just a program though, it allowed me to really develop my literacy skills and become more used to the process of learning.

From this introduction it seems the essay would provide examples of how, as not “just a program,” *Hooked on Phonics* shaped William’s emergent literacy development, and each example would explore some aspect of William’s experience with the program. Instead the essay lists a wide range of ideas—one for each paragraph and in an arbitrary order—of interesting possibilities for the program’s significance, yet none is examined in depth. There is no unifying theme clearly being developed to connect each idea, each point. For example, the end of the first body paragraph presents William’s earliest memories of the *Hooked on Phonics* book:

You couldn’t take my workbook from me though. That’s probably because it contained a lot of illustrations with animals and people. I even remember one time I stood on a chair (when the teacher was gone) and yelled, “I’m *Hooked on Phonics!*” I got some laughs, but quickly returned to my seat when I thought I heard the teacher coming. I remember using those workbooks as a guide and took it step-by-step as the teacher assigned us sections. The class would do spelling, grammar, and speaking assignments independently, with a small group, and even with the whole class.

Mary, in a marginal comment on this final draft, questioned the significance of the detail about the illustrations. She wrote, “[a]nd you liked these—they kept you engaged or entertained while you were working?” Her comment reveals the way in this paragraph—and throughout the essay—detailed evidence is used randomly (listed) rather than in support of a theme or claim about a larger idea. This arbitrariness to the text is especially evident in the transition from this paragraph to the next. The following is the topic sen-

tence for the second body paragraph: “The illustrations with animals and people weren’t the only reason why I liked *Hooked on Phonics* though. I think it was also how everyone else in my writing class was doing it, which showed that we were all in the same boat.” In this transition the illustrations example is pulled out as the most significant, purposeful point in the paragraph, yet it is never developed. And the second part of the transition—about being in “the same boat”—is not clearly connected to ideas in the previous paragraph or, therefore, any broader theme or claim.

The entire essay is filled with these very interesting ideas and details about practical strategies for learning phonics and social qualities of the program (being part of a group and developing self-confidence). Yet, typical of five-paragraph themes, none of the ideas is developed fully, and their connections are left up to reader interpretation; their meaning and significance are not clearly explained.

Getting to know William throughout the term I wondered to what extent this service learning basic writing course would “shake him up.” When writing about his experiences tutoring his first grade literacy partner, would he impose his five-paragraph-opening-with-questions-formula, or would he develop some new rhetorical strategies for representing, and thus complicating, his experiences? Also, when tutoring his literacy partner would he stick to some sort of formula, or would he create multiple kinds of tutoring strategies?

“An Alternate Learning Environment”: Critical Reflection on Tutoring

William was one of the few students in the class who registered for the course because it was a service learning section. Unlike most of his classmates, many of whom were unaware they would even be tutoring as part of the course, he actually chose the course because he knew he would be tutoring at the specific elementary school with which he had had experience. Since the beginning of the school year (this study took place during winter term), William had been volunteering at Elm weekly in an after-school tutoring program known as “Power Hour.” Although through both programs William saw the children at Elm only once a week, he viewed his work with them as continuous. In other words, rather than simply conducting distinct weekly tutoring sessions, William sought to make a connection with specific children as a mentor.

At a freshman orientation inviting incoming students to get involved in the community, William had readily chosen tutoring. It is possible that

his desire was partially rooted in the absence of a person to fulfill that role for him when he was a child. In his literacy autobiography, he writes, “As a child I looked up to anyone who was a positive role-model since there weren’t many in my family. It would have been nice to have a mentor, but I didn’t need one that bad since I had positive influences like a teacher and peers.” William seems committed to the idea of mentoring a child to be the “positive role-model” that he did not have. Also unlike many of his classmates, William instinctively, perhaps because of his own background, does not separate the experience of tutoring a child in reading and writing from the more personal aspects of mentoring that child. In his second interview, he discussed what he believes the purpose of such State University outreach programs is for Elm:

William: To provide an alternative learning environment or system to students who just otherwise have their parents and teachers. An alternate tutoring source.

Nancy: And what do you mean by alternate? Alternate to what?

William: Besides the teachers and parents.

Nancy: And how would such an alternate be different from what the teachers and parents can provide?

William: Someone that’s more close to their age. Someone that’s trying to do well. They’re in college and they’re helping you. Someone to look up to.

William’s broader understanding of his tutoring role as similar to that of a mentor also may be why he is troubled by, and feels the need to discuss, what he learns about his partner.

The first grader with whom Mary paired William was Michael, who, as William described during class to his small group, is “also mixed” racially. As Michael’s mentor, William sought to make a connection with his literacy partner. It was especially crucial that William connect with Michael in some way because Michael was, as William described him, “a difficult one” who was reading below grade level. During their tutoring sessions together, William began connecting with Michael by using stickers as a reward system. By guaranteeing Michael stickers for going over flashcards or reading a book, William was able to motivate Michael to make productive use of their forty-five minutes a week together. Yet, just when William thought his tutorials with Michael were going better, he had another difficult session and was disturbed by what he learned about Michael’s home life.

In his sixth observation journal, William describes a “difficult” tutoring session in which Michael was “unaffected” and “uninterested.” William explains that Michael told him he was up late the night before playing video games. William writes, “I’m a little disturbed that [Michael’s] dad is letting him play ‘mature’ games with blood and violence as a first grader. I just hope this doesn’t negatively affect [Michael] in the long run although for some odd reason I think it will.” Ann E. Green argues that it is necessary to tell such “difficult stories,” specifically about race and class, in service learning classrooms and scholarship in order to “more effectively negotiate the divide between the university and the community and work toward social change” (276). She adds that such stories “are both partial and contradictory” and “absolutely necessary if service learning will lead to social change” (278) to help “open the door for more complex theorizing about the relationship between those who serve and those who are served” (277). Certainly, William’s difficult tutoring session with Michael is framed by other “both partial and contradictory” difficult stories about the Elm community as revealed by the school principal and Michael’s teacher. When I interviewed the Elm Elementary school principal, Mr. Smith, about the struggles of the Elm community as a whole, he said, “That’s easy. If we have a 90% poverty rate—our [rate of] free and reduced [lunches] is around 90%—then you have those issues you’re dealing with in the community. Poverty. That has its own issues that you have to deal with.” Michael’s teacher, Ms. Jackson, provided a brief portrait of her perception of the home lives of many of the children at Elm in her first interview. She said, “If you ask them what they do at home, they watch TV. Maybe somebody talks to them. They get fed, if they’re lucky—that’s the sad part.” William’s reflections on the “difficult” tutoring session alluded to the social issues within which his tutoring of Michael took place.

Although William was “disturbed” by the information he learned about his partner’s home environment, he did not let it keep him from trying to connect with Michael while tutoring him. In his journal about his second-to-last tutorial with Michael, William explains the strategy he developed of creating note cards with Michael of words and phrases from the video games and gaming systems Michael plays to get Michael to read and write. William writes, “To my surprise, this ‘new’ strategy of using [Michael’s] interests as a teaching tool really worked. I luckily made enough note cards to last for the whole period and [Michael] was actually anxious to read the next one.” Although in this journal entry William writes optimistically of using Michael’s personal interests as a bridge to academic lessons, in his

second interview he reflected more critically on the pedagogical strategy he developed:

William: So, that's kind of like how I encompassed what his interests were. . . It kind of makes me scared too because I'm kind of promoting it by teaching him the terms. But at the same time I'm teaching him new words, all different words like "PlayStation 2." And I spell out "two"; I don't just put the number "2." And then the company that makes them, which is Sony. But I'm teaching him some new stuff, but I don't know if I'm also promoting just him getting used to video game terms.

Nancy: Well, maybe it's like a bridge from what he's familiar with to then these new things—

William: Cuz then, I started to put in new terms like Internet, Broadband, and Dial-Up. And he was like, "What's this? These aren't video game names." I'm like, "Yes, but these are what video games can use." And then I start from there and go to other stuff. I kind of try to sneak in some other terms he hasn't seen before. But he reads them anyway. He keeps grabbing for more. I don't have enough note cards to show him, keep writing them down. I have probably like twenty note cards back and front. It took almost the whole time to do them.

Even though William avoided violent words and phrases, he was "scared" that he was promoting Michael's use of violent video games by teaching him to read and write terms related to the games. The observation journals are designed for such critical reflection, yet William chose to represent his tutoring experience in a less critical and uncomplicated way. In his journal, William's only reflection was that this tutoring strategy "really worked," but in his interview with me he questioned the implications of this strategy. He realized that while using terms related to Michael's interest in video games might help this first grader with reading and writing (and, therefore, make tutoring sessions go more smoothly), this strategy, by possibly promoting late-night gaming, could reinforce a hobby that might, in the long run, interfere with Michael's academic achievement.

William adopted strategies trying to better meet his literacy partner's needs, as opposed to uncritically and unreflectively imposing a formula or script on his tutoring. When Michael "shook up" William's expectations, William adapted and created a new pedagogical strategy. William's tutor-

ing effectiveness even overcame Mary's initial doubts. Around mid-term, while observing a tutoring session, Mary smiled as she watched William and Michael together and leaned over to me and said, "William is doing a good job with Michael." She added that William had asked her for books that contain only one line on a page. Then, together we watched William pointing underneath each word on each page of a book, asking Michael to sound it out. William seemed to work through this evolution in the tutoring process in his observation journals—an informal writing assignment. But what about his academic writing? Could he break from his use of formula and develop some new rhetorical strategies for representing, and thus complicating, his experiences?

"Seeing the Bigger Picture": Critical Engagement with Sources

As it came time for the second formal writing assignment, the investigation essay, the fervent desire of William and his classmates to be "told what to write" bore out the basic writing program's lore about this student population's penchant for writing instructions and formulas. In his first interview, William said that one of the things he disliked about the class was that Mary was not "more specific on papers." He expressed particular concern about this second paper, as it must include research. He said he was "not sure about the topic" and that he "could've had a head start" if Mary would have "been specific." He added, "For something that long, we have to know." Later in the interview, in response to a question about his opinion of the writing assignments in the course, he added that "ideas and specific details might be a problem with this paper." He said, "Without a topic first, it's hard to find specific details." This interview was conducted right before the class period in which Mary led the students in a "topic review" meant to help students choose their areas of interest. Each student went around the room offering the topic they were considering. (Some students did change their topics before the first draft was due the following week). This was Friday, and they would have to commit to their investigation topics on that Monday, so the students had a few days to fret over their topics first—clearly all part of the process.

For the first draft of the investigation essay, Mary did provide some written instructions. Her prompt read: "Once you have settled on a general topic, I'd like you to write an exploratory draft presenting what you already know about the topic and introducing the questions you would like to explore." Even prior to doing the exploratory draft, William wrote a hand-

written outline, as he did for each formal writing assignment. It contained three roman numerals, which were labeled “Introduction,” “Main Body,” and “Conclusion,” denoting three sections of the paper. The second or “Main Body” section was broken down into four sub-sections: “Beginning,” “Middle,” “Middle (2),” and “Middle (3).” In its level of detail, the outline represented a nearly sentence-by-sentence plan. For example, in Section I, next to the letter A, William wrote, “Opening sentence” and below it, next to the letter B, he added, “Thesis statement (Our education system today),” under which he listed four questions or issues about this broad topic. The sub-sections seemed to indicate the different paragraphs within the “Main Body” section, although each topic warranted its own separate paper. For example, listed under “Middle (3)” were letters A-F, each with sub-sub-topics such as “sports,” “school supplies,” and “property value.” Listed under each capital letter were numbers and also, for some entries, lower-case letters. Although his topic was quite broad, the outline represented a complex process for teasing out various issues and ideas which William could research. Yet, as indicated by the checkmarks he placed next to most sections and sub-sections as he wrote, reminding himself that he had covered that part, William used the outline as a formula or roadmap for drafting his essay.

In the typed, double-spaced, two-page “exploratory draft” of the essay, it is clear that William followed his outline exactly, although he ended up only drafting material from the first half of the outline. Nothing from “Middle (3)” onward appears in that first draft, and some of this information does not appear in any of the three subsequent drafts, although William did add most of it in later drafts. The “exploratory draft” begins, like all of William’s writings for this class, with questions: “What is our education system in the United States like today? How well is the quality of education being provided and what issues are there with the teachers and students?” Then, in the subsequent four paragraphs of the draft, William treats each of his sources—which in this exploratory, “what-you-know” draft are some of the class “texts”—separately. These class texts include *Holler If You Hear Me* by Gregory Michie, a teacher’s narrative about teaching in inner-city Chicago public schools, and the how-to tutoring guide *Help America Read*. In his first body paragraph he discusses how he used strategies from *Help* to tutor his Elm literacy partner; in the second he describes *Holler*’s author’s “ongoing struggle for social justice for Latino and African American students”; and the final paragraph presents what he has learned from working with his literacy partner. Because of this draft’s focus on sources rather than ideas from these sources, the second and final paragraphs are nearly identical. In both, he

discusses strategies and “techniques” he learned from *Help America Read* and how he used them with his partner. Furthermore, as could be expected in this preliminary, writer-based draft, particularly in his discussions of tutoring his partner, the essay reads more like a personal narrative about what William learned rather than a more academic essay in which William makes an argument to an audience. For example, William writes, “The book *Help America Read* has really aided in educating me on the strategies to use in the classroom of my first grader. I like that the theme is helping kids to become more literate. This makes me feel like I’m accomplishing something....” In the subsequent three drafts of this assignment, William drew on feedback from Mary, his peers, and me (as participant-observer, I conducted in-class peer response on two drafts) to focus more on ideas than sources and present his arguments for an academic audience.² Drafting and revising this assignment involved difficult and complicated tasks, specifically for William, synthesizing “a rich mix of sources” and learning to use them as evidence to support claims.

Drawing on feedback, William conducted major revisions from his preliminary two-page draft to the nine-page final version. A comparison of the four drafts illustrates that on each one William not only added further information and sources, but also re-organized paragraphs and ideas within paragraphs. Each draft except the final one, which contained only Mary’s comments, was replete with handwritten comments from Mary, his peers, and me in addition to revising and editing ideas William had jotted down. As William sat down to revise each draft, his task was to consolidate all of this feedback and translate it into new words on the page.

Evident in the revisions he made in the subsequent three drafts, William demonstrated a number of general rhetorical features of academic writing, which include defining and applying (testing) a theory, synthesizing sources, and using evidence from sources to support claims. The theory William explored in this assignment was about social justice, specifically the theme of teaching for social justice. Through our comments, Mary and I helped pull out William’s theory of teaching for social justice as a theme and focus because William’s early drafts were guided more by individual sources rather than a controlling idea. The focus of this analysis, however, was on William’s progress testing this theory by synthesizing sources and using evidence from sources to support claims—in short, his ability to use what Arca calls a “rich mix of sources.” Most interesting were the connections William made among all of these sources in his exploration of teaching for

social justice, including not only secondary book sources, but also primary evidence from tutoring at Elm.

In addition to applying a theory by using evidence from sources, through his revisions William demonstrated that he could make connections between—synthesize—different kinds of sources. Because his preliminary drafts were organized by sources rather than ideas from sources to support a thesis, he was consistently encouraged to make connections among his sources. For example, on his second draft one classmate wrote during peer response, “Pretty good essay. Be careful to stay focused though. There are so many subtopics in this essay (not a bad thing) but always make sure you get back to your main topic.” On that same draft, noting two sentences in the conclusion, Mary asks in the margin, “Is this what ties all your points together?” On his third draft, in an end comment I wrote, “I like the rich variety of sources you’re using. I hope I offer you [in the margins] some suggestions for tying all of this great info together.” Mary and I both offered marginal comments next to several paragraphs that asked William to make connections between specific sources.

In his fourth and final draft, William finally began making connections among his sources, synthesizing them. These explicit connections are important not only in that they allow William to show academic readers how evidence from source information is related in support of his focus or central argument, but also to enable him to generalize from examples and explain the reasoning behind his claims. In our comments on his third draft, Mary and I asked him to interpret evidence from source material. For example, Mary wrote in the margin of a paragraph that was filled with statistics, “This [paragraph symbol] includes a lot of statistical info—what do you want readers to learn from it?” Next to a quote William used from one of his sources, I wrote, “Such a powerful and complex quote! What do you think the author means by it?” Mary also asked him to generalize from specific examples in his source information. For example, she wrote, “How is what Michie [source author] learned applicable to education systems in general?” Comments and questions prompted him to use his sources more actively in support of claims.

By his final (fourth) draft, William revised to draw clearer connections among his sources—even by re-arranging some paragraphs to more effectively organize his ideas and make such connections more explicit. Yet, what I found to be the most impressive, active example of his making connections among his “rich mix of sources” (Arca 140) was that he included his tutoring experience at Elm as a source. The third draft of his essay presented

the opportunity to query William on the connection between his tutoring and what had emerged as a focus on social justice. A paragraph in which he describes his strategies for tutoring Michael seemed to resonate the strategies of Michie's *Holler If You Hear Me*, prompting Mary to comment, "Is your goal, like Michie's to prevent drop-outs? Are there other ways to approach [Michael]—more closely related to Michie's work?" Although William had transitioned from the previous paragraph to this one invoking a connection between Michie's experience and his—"Many of the principles Michie learned as a teacher are what I wanted to adopt as a mentor to my first grader at [Elm] Elementary"—he left this connection unexplored. In this draft the two paragraphs about his tutoring experience read like an observation journal in that, although William reflected on his tutoring process and what the experience meant to him, it was exclusively personal. It was reflection for its own sake (and for him personally) rather than a use of personal experience as evidence with connections to other forms of evidence in support of claims in an academic argument. By his final draft, however, William made this experience "academic":

[end of paragraph] Many of the principles Michie learned as a teacher are what I wanted to adopt as a mentor to my first grader at [Elm] Elementary.

Like Michie, I also wanted to make a difference in a child's life by showing that I cared and was willing to listen to my partner in order to provide a fair educational experience to him. I think teaching for social justice in my case is important because it allows me to work 'for' [my partner] Michael and make sure he's getting the most out of my time with him. The book Help America Read has really aided in educating me on the strategies to use in the classroom of my first grader. I like that the theme is helping kids to become more literate. This makes me feel like I'm accomplishing something when I use note-cards, word-wall words, and the alphabet book to help my partner, Michael, learn (Michie 5-7, 51) [wrong author in citation]. I think it's important to put in a lot of effort even though the teaching process may not go as smoothly as I would like it to. [Mary commented, "as Michie discovered, right?"] An example of this would include Michael wanting to draw instead of read and write. This would frustrate me but I quickly learned that the use of "stickers" as an award for meeting a quota of reading and writing worked out well. I believe the reward system works because it praises a child for

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good behavior which gives them the incentive to be more productive more often. There are other strategies I used that are closely related to Michie's flexible teaching style and even Paulo Freire's concept of authenticity. The "authenticity of my thinking was authenticated" by Michael when I used his love of video games to teach him the vocabulary terms of games, companies, and developers in the industry. I did this with note-cards, a writing assignment, and with verbal guidance. Michie did something similar with his Media class where he used his student's love of TV to teach them about the real meaning behind what they watch everyday (Michie 90). Like Michie, I remained flexible with my teaching style and often changed up my technique if it was not working well.

William continued with another paragraph about his experience of tutoring, which he revised to add another source connecting the tutoring to his reading, and which he ends, "I have enjoyed teaching for social justice so far and I want to continue to learn more about how the education system works in inner city schools by being a mentor next quarter as well."

William does not go so far as to discuss how volunteering as a literacy tutor/mentor in general is the work of social justice—that is, to make explicit connections between the claims in other paragraphs about discrimination and poverty limiting a fair education for students in urban, public schools. He does, however, manage to use this personal tutoring experience as evidence in an academic argument. In discussing how he works "for" Michael, he describes how his video game reading and writing activity compares with the pedagogical strategy employed by one of his sources. This connection between the Michie text and William's tutoring "text" is a difficult one considering the age differences between Michie's students and the Elm first graders (Michie's are older) and the differing roles of teacher and tutor. Furthermore, William even uses a complex partial quotation from Paulo Freire (as "The Banking Concept" from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was another one of their assigned readings for class) to allude to his student-centered tutoring strategy: "authenticity of my thinking was authenticated." This quotation confused William during the class discussion—he read it aloud to the class as a question. Yet, he found a way to use it meaningfully in his writing.

Although the resulting paragraph is dense and in need of better organization, in it William combined his personal tutoring experience with various kinds of academic sources. He represented his tutoring experiences in dialogue with other course texts. One of these texts was the how-to tutoring

guide *Help America Read*, advice William translated in the essay as “note-cards, word-wall words, and the alphabet book to help my partner. . . .” William also referred to the more personal aspects of teaching and connecting with students as narrated by Michie in *Holler*, which William connected to his own experience in the following way:

The “authenticity of my thinking was authenticated” by Michael when I used his love of video games to teach him the vocabulary terms of games, companies, and developers in the industry. I did this with note-cards, a writing assignment, and with verbal guidance. Michie did something similar with his Media class where he used his student’s love of TV to teach them about the real meaning behind what they watch everyday (Michie 90).

For his summary, William cites page 90 of Michie’s text, which is the first page of the chapter, although it is on page 92 that Michie explains his pedagogical reasoning for teaching TV. Michie writes, to counter the ways “both teachers and students can become zombified at school,” “I had to find ways to engage them. I had to find things for them to do—things that were relevant, things that would interest them, things that could not be accomplished without the one element that sometimes seems most foreign to school classrooms: real, live, unadulterated thinking” (92). Like Michie, William sought to engage his literacy partner Michael with “things that would interest” him. Although William does not quote his secondary sources at length, his writing is intertextual and dialogic as an academic essay should be.

In the final draft of his investigation essay, William demonstrated that he was able to achieve critical distance from a personal experience and situate this “text” among other sophisticated texts. He not only reflected on the experience and thought critically about it, but he also represented such critical thinking rhetorically in accordance with the conventions of an academic essay. William used examples of the reward system and note-card activity from his tutoring as evidence to support claims—gleaned from secondary sources—about teaching practices of care and flexibility for “teaching for social justice.” Yet, in this process of academicizing his experience he did not lose his edge. He concludes the essay, “With time, the struggle for social justice will be met with more people trying to make sure that it becomes more fair to urban schools, and I am willing to be part of that, what say you?”

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Based on William’s final draft, there are certainly aspects of academic writing, in particular, on which he needs continued work. These include complicating and qualifying the thesis, further developing sources, and stylistic and sentence-level issues. Yet, if a main curricular goal of this course is for students to break out of their preconceived formulas for “good writing” and take some risks to grapple with complicated ideas in writing, certainly, William accomplished this goal.

On the whole, through the process of researching, drafting, and revising the second formal writing assignment—the investigation essay—William demonstrated that he had learned a lot about academic writing. He took a new and complex idea (teaching for social justice) and used a variety of sources (statistics, personal experience with education, testimony/stories in texts, tutoring experience) to make an argument about urban public education, even though he still had some, as Mary wrote on his final draft, “smoothing out” to do in his use of academic discourse. Furthermore, rather than adhering to a preconceived formula for “good” academic essay writing, he moved beyond a five-paragraph theme and learned to use feedback to revise for an audience and conventions of a particular genre. Also admirable, when he revised, he really revised. Although his fourth, and final, draft spilled onto the tenth page (the assignment did not dictate page requirements), which illustrated that he was reluctant to cut anything from previous drafts (a tall and painful order for novice and experienced writers alike), he was not afraid to move paragraphs around, entirely re-write paragraphs, and add more effective transitions between each idea.

It was also remarkable that William was able to reflect on his writing process and academic literacy at the meta-level. Discussing his thoughts on the investigation essay in his second interview, he said, “I think for me it’s kind of like trial and error, but I’m learning from my mistakes and trying to make it the best paper I have. I rely highly on the feedback from the students, you, and Mary because you guys will see things that I don’t. So, I rely highly on that feedback.” Although he retains the idea that there is a right and a wrong way to write—that his mistakes are to be fixed—he comes to view audience feedback as an integral part of his writing process. Also in his second interview, he describes what he believes to be his struggles as a writer, which are “trying to look at the bigger picture of writing when I write, like building on my theme and topic sentence and closing sentence, citing sources—just trying to get the bigger picture and do it well.” William’s idea of the “bigger picture of writing” nicely captures his progress from the first to the final draft of the investigation essay in which he moved from using

each paragraph as a separate topic and source to all parts of the paper working together to develop a theme.

Conclusion

William represents a best case for the possibilities of service learning for this particular population of basic writers. His five-paragraph-theme formula for “good” writing was “shaken up” in that primarily he demonstrated he could revise for an audience (based on peer and instructor feedback) as well as draw on a combination of primary (personal tutoring experience) and secondary sources as evidence to support an academic argument. Of course, what distinguishes William from his peers is that he self-selected this particular service learning course because he was already an after-school mentor at the same school. Most students in the class did not know it was a service learning section, and those who did had no stake in the participating elementary school. Furthermore, William chose to be a mentor at Elm based on some issues in his background, specifically his desire for “a positive role model.” William was, therefore, already invested in the idea of this particular form of community service. I believe that this personal investment was key to William’s attempts in his investigation essay to make connections between his personal tutoring experience and secondary sources, which led to more complex and less formulaic writing. In short, the community *service* contributed to his *learning* academic literacies.

In service learning classes it is crucial that students place the service in a larger social context by reflecting on social issues and working toward “critical consciousness.” Otherwise, the service is simply a practicum or internship, in this case a practicum for an education course in tutoring. Without the social context, the keeping of observation journals is just reflection on tutoring practices, and there is little connection to social justice aims. But as this course is also a basic writing course, the primary goal must be to help these students become better prepared college writers. A way to combine these goals in the curriculum is to make mandatory what William did voluntarily, which is to use the service/tutoring experience as a “text”/source in an academic essay assignment. In this case, Elm Elementary and its faculty and students would become a site of inquiry for academic research.

Yet, should instructors make such academicizing of students’ service/tutoring experience a mandatory part of an academic essay? William had what he perceived to be a positive tutoring experience, a tutoring success story, which, it could be argued, is in some ways “easier” to write about.

What about some of the other students who participated in this study and discussed negative experiences, feeling unsuccessful as tutors? Sometimes there are just poor matches of a college student with a child to tutor. The benefit of doing what Mary did—allowing students to choose their own research topics related to the theme of “education”—is that (1) students are possibly more invested in the topic and, therefore, want to research and write about it, and (2) they can choose a topic they can find sources on in the few weeks they have to complete the assignment. The drawback to this freedom of choice is that students do not necessarily have the experience of making the service experience academic as William did. They do not have the opportunity to achieve critical distance and contextualize their service work among other sources/scholars as evidence for an academic argument. Furthermore, they do not have to engage in the social issues surrounding their specific service experience in writing an academic essay.

Still, students who have less than ideal service experiences, even negative ones, can academicize this work in their research writing for class. These students are perhaps even better positioned to achieve critical distance from their service work and better prepared to use this “personal” experience in support of an academic argument, even if the argument is a critique of such service. Instructors employing service learning pedagogy should engage in inquiry with students, continually interrogating the contested meanings—and ethics—of terms such as *service*, *community*, and *social justice*. Furthermore, in examining the social issues inherent to the service component of the course, students and instructor, working together, have an opportunity to analyze the nature of that service work—its theories and practices—candidly exposing benefits and consequences. For example, as discussed earlier, it was interesting that William shared with me in an interview—and not in his writing or in class discussion—a critical reflection of his service/tutoring practice of appealing to his partner’s interest in video games as a literacy lesson. He said he was “scared” that through this practice he was encouraging what he perceived to be a hobby that was detrimental to his partner’s school achievement (staying up late and experiencing violence in the games). Because William shared this only with me, it was not part of the larger class “text.” If William had written about this—or even raised the issue in a class discussion—it would have been a real opportunity to be critical of the limitations of such service, while not diminishing this work. How many other students who subscribe to such service “success story” scripts are withholding critical insights that could actually broaden perceptions of service work? Students, regardless of their kinds of service experiences, can

successfully and ethically academicize this work in their research and writing by being taught academically acceptable methods for doing so.

Perhaps one way for students to both practice academic literacies and work toward “critical consciousness” in service learning writing courses is to conduct ethnographic research of their community service experience. Ellen Cushman argues that through such work students and teachers can engage in inquiry together on service learning projects.³ She claims, “Case studies, teacher-research, or ethnographies (in which literacy artifacts, taped dialogues, interview transcripts, transcripts from class discussions, and survey results are collected) are methodologies that readily lend themselves to service learning” in addition to postmodern research methodologies (47). Students could also be taught to draw on these methods to represent their “personal” experience in academic essays as evidence (Spigelman) as William did. The textbook *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research* by Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sunstein is especially useful in preparing students to conduct such community-based fieldwork and grapple with such ethical issues as reciprocity and representation—crucial to both service learning pedagogy and qualitative research methodologies such as ethnography. An approach to students’ and instructors’ roles in service learning classes as both servers and fieldworkers could also help engage students who, unlike William, do not come to the course already with an interest and commitment to the service aspect of the course. Beyond the more typical “observation” journal writing, ethnographic methods—such as collecting data from fieldnotes, interviews, and artifacts and conducting analysis for themes—provide students with the tools to make academic their “personal” service experience and achieve critical distance for their research and writing. There is a fine line, however, between inquiry and making the community members in this partnership “research subjects.” For example, in this particular program, one ethical question that arises relates to how much students should know about their first grade literacy partners. Moreover, because the students do not necessarily know in advance that their English class is a service learning section, I do not believe it would be fair to make studying the community site mandatory. For this reason, I support Mary’s decision to give her students freedom of choice regarding their research topics.

William’s case also demonstrates a particular challenge for using writing-about service learning courses, like this one, in first-year writing courses in which the goal is to expand students’ academic literacies. As discussed at the start of this article, in writing-about courses, students engage in academic writing about social issues related to the service, as opposed to writing-for, in

which the writing is the service (e.g., producing brochures, newsletters, grant proposals) for non-profits, though certainly they may do academic writing for class as well. In writing-for service learning composition courses, the writing is still the course content/focus; therefore, it is easier for students to connect the service to course content. In this writing-about class, the tutoring is the service, and while this service is closely connected to the course theme of literacy and education, students need to make more of a leap to connect tutoring first graders to their own emergent academic literacies. For example, in a content course like geology, it is pretty easy to connect service to content—a class geological study for a particular community with classroom study of geology. In writing-about composition courses the service is about some other content—the course theme. In this case, that theme was the broad “literacy and education,” which would more logically fit either an upper-division course in literacy or an education course about tutoring as opposed to a basic writing class. Therefore, in writing-about composition service learning classes, it is crucial that connections between the service and course content be made explicit by and for students in multiple forms of writing and speaking. And it is the instructor who needs to structure opportunities for students to make these connections for themselves. Students could be asked continually to contextualize the “texts” of their service work in relation to other class texts. Discussion questions or assignment prompts could be derived from particularly complex quotations from readings or films related to, for example, literacy or teaching for social justice. Class activities could ask students to examine their roles as servers/tutors. Designing ways to use service learning pedagogy effectively in basic writing classes involves a lot of hard work. And for students to process their service *and* learning in the course, the students and instructor need to be committed to both.

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Notes

1. According to Cady, the basic writing program director, a small group of instructors in the program, including Mary, who consistently taught the service learning courses developed procedures that would keep classes consistent enough so that the schools would be assigned teachers and students similarly focused on both practical and social dimensions of tutoring from semester to semester. Yet procedures allowed flexibility for instructors to design their own syllabi.
2. This is an analysis of written feedback only. On each draft students not only received Mary's and peers' feedback, but they also conferred with Mary at least once for each formal assignment.
3. It is important to note that Cushman does not support the use of service learning in first-year courses; rather, the focus of her work is in upper-division courses. Rosemary Arca indicates that service learning projects in her classes are optional.

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